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Review: 'Inventing the Holy Land: American Protestant Pilgrimage to Palestine, 1865–1941'

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Stephanie Stidham Rogers. *Inventing the Holy Land: American Protestant Pilgrimage to Palestine, 1865-1941*. Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2011. Pp. x, 163. \$60.00.

Anyone who knows American evangelicalism from the inside is familiar with the Holy Land pilgrimage. Often organized by a local pastor, the tour involves visiting holy sites in Israel, “walking where Jesus walked,” as it were. During their trip the pastor and/or other tour guides connect the sites they are visiting with the appropriate Scripture passages, the focus of the trip being the Biblical past and the prophetic future (and not the contemporary political and religious situation). On their return the happy pilgrims report on their Holy Land experiences to those who were left behind, often in a Sunday evening slide show replete with testimonials.

Of course, these pilgrimages have a history. In *Inventing the Holy Land* Stephanie Stidham Rogers examines American Protestant tourism in Palestine from 1865 (when travel to the Middle East from the United States begins to take off) until the onset of World War II. Using 35 pilgrimage narratives as the basis of her study -- and it would have been helpful to have a separate and annotated bibliographical section for these narratives -- Rogers discusses how American Protestant visitors were troubled by the poverty and filth, dismayed by the ubiquity of Catholic and Orthodox shrines, and outraged by the role of Muslims in administering Christian holy sites. In response these pilgrims worked “to create a Holy Land that was more biblical, or more Protestant” (4). By the end of the nineteenth century this vision of biblical Palestine occupied an important place in American Protestantism, with the frequent inclusion of Holy Land maps and photographs of Palestine in Bibles (in contrast with *Inventing the Holy Land*, which contains neither maps nor photographs), and with the emergence of biblical

archaeology as a field of study. Most remarkably, American Protestants came to understand this “invented” Holy Land as a “fifth gospel” that gave Protestants “a way to skip centuries of ecclesiastical corruption and excess . . . to return to the basic, original, and undeniable truths of the Gospel” (32).

In her strongest chapter, “The Out-of-Doors Gospel in Palestine,” Rogers emphasizes how American Protestants established outdoor pilgrimage sites. These included the Jordan River, where pilgrims stood on the banks and sang hymns, and the Mount of Beatitudes, where American Protestants sat on the slopes and read the Sermon on the Mount (generally eschewing the opportunity to enter the Catholic shrine). Then there was the Garden Tomb, a rock outcropping which the British General Charles Gordon proposed (with little in the way of evidence) as the site of Jesus’ crucifixion. A very popular alternative to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, a “site rejected [by American Protestants] for its superstitious idolatry and excessive tradition,” the Garden Tomb offered visitors the opportunity to sit on benches “under the canopy of trees and sky” (124) and contemplate Golgotha.

Oddly enough, while “the out-of-doors became the new altar or Protestant shrine” (138), it did not seem to unduly concern pilgrims if Gordon’s outcropping really was the site of Golgotha, or if the designated Mount of Beatitudes really was where Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, or if they really were walking where Jesus walked. What mattered to these late 19th-century and early 20th-century American Protestant pilgrims – and is probably still the case with their 21st-century counterparts – was that they have a subjective spiritual experience, as the real Holy Land “lay in the hearts and minds of believers rather than in a particular landscape” (120).

Given the spiritualized Holy Land, it makes sense that the actual living, breathing individuals living in Palestine were not of interest in and of themselves. As regards the local Arabs, they were simply seen as “figures frozen in a miniature diorama,” providing a “vision of the ancient world” (15) for the benefit of the Protestant pilgrims (who, Rogers points out, generally ignored the presence of Arab Christian communities). As regards Jews in Palestine, their equally two-dimensional role had to do with the future. As dispensational premillennialism – the Biblical prophecy schema developed by Charles Nelson Darby – swept through much of American Protestantism, pilgrims came to see them as the advance guard of a Jewish settlement in the Holy Land that “would hasten the millennium and act as a harbinger of the end times and the return of Christ” (93).

Inventing the Holy Land is insightful and interesting. It is unfortunate that it is marred by writing problems. Particularly confusing is the author’s practice of providing direct quotes without mentioning in the text who is being quoted. This is particularly problematic in a paragraph (e.g., second paragraph on 104) in which there are quotes from multiple sources, but no indication as to which are from primary sources and which are from scholars commenting on these primary sources.

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